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# Letters to Grandma: A Comparison of Generational Perspectives of Women's Growth as Higher Education Faculty

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### Abstract

This ethnographic compilation is the result of a course exercise in qualitative research. A current student of Texas Tech University interviewed an 87-yearold faculty member from the 1950s, comparing her experiences to those of the author in similar, present-day academic environments. The author developed the format of the paper as letters between a young faculty member and her experienced grandmother. Results of the study reflect many similarities between the experiences of past female faculty members and female faculty of today; the exercise does convey, however, many advances for women in the academic culture as well. Finally, the recorded experiences of the older woman support those scenarios highlighted in the study of higher education's history.

### Keywords

Higher Education, Women, Faculty, Ethnography

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## Letters to Grandma: A Comparison of Generational Perspectives of Women's Growth as Higher Education Faculty

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*This ethnographic compilation is the result of a course exercise in qualitative research. A current student of Texas Tech University interviewed an 87-year-old faculty member from the 1950s, comparing her experiences to those of the author in similar, present-day academic environments. The author developed the format of the paper as letters between a young faculty member and her experienced grandmother. Results of the study reflect many similarities between the experiences of past female faculty members and female faculty of today; the exercise does convey, however, many advances for women in the academic culture as well. Finally, the recorded experiences of the older woman support those scenarios highlighted in the study of higher education's history. Keywords: Higher Education, Women, Faculty, Ethnography*

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As a student of qualitative research, I now view the world from the perspectives of frameworks and contexts, and I align my everyday interactions with grounded theory, open coding, and reflexive thoughts. I recently married my desire to try my hand at the qualitative approach to fact-gathering and data analysis with my ongoing interest in the relationships of women within the professional field of higher education. The result is a reflexive comparison of two very distinct professional experiences in the world of higher education, my own and that of my 87 year-old grandmother.

I became interested in the topic of women's professional relationships in higher education through personal experiences and informal conversations with other women. In a natural response to curiosity, I began looking for articles related to relationships between women within professional environments. It seemed that females should be connecting to prior generations in ways that encourage ongoing growth and development in women as a minority population (Bolman & Deal, 2008), but it did not appear that many articles, specifically related to professional women in higher education, were readily available (Clark, Caffarella, & Ingram, 1999; Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Rosser & Lane, 2002).

As a 34 year-old, female, aspiring professional in higher education—with degrees in both English and psychology—I had several negative experiences with female co-workers and supervisors in the workplace. Many times women made *catty* comments about me or other female employees during *cooperative* projects; these were distasteful communication practices identified in previous research regarding women in professional settings (Mooney, 2005; Tanenbaum, 2002).

My first superior instructed me to buy attire according to her tastes, and warned me that even though my hair was well-groomed, I might have to cut it in order to maintain a professional appearance acceptable to her. My last superior, a woman in a dean's position, literally danced down the hall when she heard I resigned to work full-time on my doctorate degree. Even though she was in her sixties, and planning to retire within the next five years, she could not see me as a protégée. She only saw me as her competition (Cullen & Luna, 1993).

In all of these instances I wondered what occurred that caused these women to feel the need to place themselves in competitive relationships with fellow female employees. I assumed many of these women would act as mentors in my own and others' development;

but, they were instead aggressive and controlling within professional relationships with other women.

In addition to these perceived struggles with female co-workers, it concerned me that I might have communicated similar aggression to female co-workers within professional settings (LaFreniere & Longman, 2008; Northouse, 2010). I like to think of myself as congenial, but self-exploration and reflection may need to be part of every woman's journey to more fulfilling interpersonal relationships with other professional women.

Continuing down this path of discovery, I realized I had a unique resource available to me. My surrogate grandmother, a past instructor at a selective, private, Christian university in central Texas, had many experiences with female co-workers and supervisors during her time as a professional in higher education. She taught four years in the secretarial business department as part of an all-female staff and faculty. I believe it important to not only hear my grandmother's experiences as a professional woman in higher education during the 1950's, but also to utilize this information in a way that better defines current interpersonal relationships among professional women today.

Women feel compelled to support one another and befriend one another, even when such relationships are without depth or authenticity (Mooney, 2005). Without some in-depth exploration of the professional relationships among women, and the negativity I perceive within these relationships, women cannot break what many may view as a damaging cycle. If women intend to move forward as a strong minority group, we must develop a cohesive and trusting bond with one another. After several decades amidst "liberation," women still struggle to present a unified gender (Mooney, 2005). I believe deeper exploration of this phenomenon will begin to alter women's views of one another and their interpersonal relationships (or lack thereof).

### **Framework and Methodology**

My framework encompassed many of my own experiences as a professional in higher education. Additionally, I approached the data through the lens of the organizational socialization theory (Schrodt, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003) a theory that identifies the progression of a new employee's assimilation into the dominant professional culture, including the acceptance of the dominant culture's standards and mores by the new employee. In the context of this study, the data highlighted my progression into the professional academic culture, as well as the impact my internal assimilation had on my personal identity. I also developed the study within my personal context and that of my grandmother's. Both of us value and give great priority to the world of higher education. Beyond that, I view many of my interactions with other professional women as frustrating and limited, whereas my grandmother's viewpoints are from the perspective of an outgoing octogenarian.

My methodology includes an autoethnographic approach and an interview process (Ellis, 2004; Merriam, 2009). As defined by Ellis (2004), the autoethnography is a research approach in which the author conveys a story of importance, a story that contributes to the understandings of human society and culture. Contrary to a standard ethnographic approach, an autoethnographic study includes the context of the author in the collection and analysis of data, rather than attempting to separate the researcher from the study (Ellis, 2004). In this study, I utilized an autoethnographic approach because my personal experiences helped to create a complete picture of two varied experiences within the realm of professional higher education. I first interviewed myself, journaling my experiences and reactions to the data on the topic of interpersonal relationships of professional women in higher education. I then interviewed an 87 year-old retired teacher who worked four years in higher education during

the 1950's. This interview process included not only formal questions asked, but also a time of informal story-telling and listening. I followed this interview with reflexive journaling on two separate occasions in order to better comprehend my deeper reactions to the information gleaned from the interview process. Throughout the collection of data, I utilized the constant comparison method and open coding (Merriam, 2009) in order to formulate the data into themes. The themes explored in this study include isolation, the role of support between women as professionals, and perception as it relates to concepts across generations. I reflected on data gathered through a letter-writing format, which provided a venue through which I could explore my emotional reactions to the data. This qualitative approach gave credence to the personal experiences of the testimonials included herein. I included my review of literature within the bodies of my representative letters, the process of which was to bring the literature closer to the meanings I derived from it and from my data. Instead of separating the two subcategories of the study, I framed my observations and conclusions with supportive facts from other researchers in the fields of qualitative analysis and professional women in the workplace in order to maintain focus on the meaning of this study.

I intend for this study to provide insights from the perceptions of an older higher education professional, as well as from an aspiring doctoral student, regarding, in particular, the interpersonal relationships among women in this setting. Additionally, the data will explore the tensions that may exist between the various generational roles of these women, the issue of isolation for both women, and their admitted needs for support systems with other female professionals. Finally, I intend the data to reflect any perceived insights of these two women regarding professional relationships with other women, specifically as it pertains to the most effective strategies and dispositions that current professional women in higher education might implement and maintain.

## Findings

Grandma,

Today I lost a piece of myself. When I began my work as an instructor in a higher education English classroom, I finally felt complete. Even though I am young, it seemed my passions and my gifts came together to create a magical environment in which my students were safe—and I was whole. It was such a supportive environment for them; they explored their best ideas and their worst fears. But this utopia didn't last. Even though I came into focus as my authentic self, my university—my place of employment—reneged on its promise to support my development into a complete professional academic. I initially expected to have financial, emotional, and intellectual support from the institution, but instead received empty assurances and unrealized encouragement. Even with the students voting me Outstanding Teacher of the Year after only my first year of employment, the college was not convinced to remain in my corner. After positive talk with the provost about doctoral opportunities, university support, financial support, and flexible scheduling in exchange for poor annual pay, the school's walk did not meet its talk.

I was accepted into a doctoral program that until then was only real in my imaginings! But my employers' exclamations of support were almost immediately silenced. I was not going to receive the flexible scheduling or necessary travel time to attend my PhD program. This about-face left me reeling, and I felt my only recourse was to resign and pursue my own education full force.

I read recently that Sandler (1986) viewed higher education as an environment typically grounded in slow-moving bureaucracy, and that opportunities for professional advancement seldom occur. I just didn't realize how seldom! It seems Sandler is right in that many women must continually battle to prove their rights to remain within positions of

authority or leadership within the collegiate setting (Solomon, 1986).<sup>1</sup> I don't understand why we are still facing these same battles. Aren't these similar to the battles you faced during your time as an instructor in higher education?

Beyond the school's lack of support, I was really shocked, and even a little shamed, by the reaction of my female supervisor when she heard of my resignation. I learned of her juvenile jig while conducting an interview with a colleague at a sister institution. Imagine my embarrassment when my interviewee casually let slip that the dean of, up until recently, my university was so pleased to lose me that she did a little dance down the hallway of the arts and sciences building when she heard of my leaving. She was thrilled beyond words to have me off of her teaching roster. Could I have really been that difficult? I sought her advice on several occasions in dealing with student issues, in working through classroom behavior problems, and in teaching difficult subject matter. Even with her halting, vague responses, I still deferred to her expertise with respect. Maybe she sensed my lack of confidence in her ability? Possibly she knew I aspired to one day follow in her footsteps. Could this have caused her concern? In some of his recent work, Heifetz (2007) describes the reality of leadership and authority, and that the two can be mutually exclusive. He points out that women historically hold positions as leaders; their insights and gender traits provide them with unique perspectives regarding motivators and ways to support others. Typically, though, women aren't given positions of authority (Heifetz, 2007). In direct contrast to Heifetz' findings, however, it seems my dean has authority without any confidence of leadership. Maybe it's just me, but I don't see her behavior as what the pioneering professional women of your time were fighting for.<sup>1</sup>

I read in Mooney (2005) that co-workers view women who earn opportunities for advancement as threats. It seems friendship, ambition, and maybe even genuine kindness and support cannot coexist within a work-based relationship. I don't know; somehow I had thought a supervisor would be capable of setting aside competitive instincts to support an underling just beginning her career. Cullen and Luna (1993) do state, though, that senior women did not have supportive women helping them grow, and therefore don't know how to support women new to the academic profession. Mooney (2005) also supports that older supervisors often resent younger women, believing these women do not show their older counterparts the respect due those who paved the way professionally for women. Do you feel this way about me, Grandma? Do I disrespect you and the efforts you made to create a place for women as professionals in higher education? Is that why my professor did a conga down the corridor?

You know, the more I think about this topic the more I reflect upon my relationships with workplace women in general. In Mooney's book (2005) I notice she talks in some detail about the interpersonal relationships between women. Mooney seems to believe that women value their relationships with one another, even though they are very fragile. Apparently, the relationships aren't built on solid foundations, and any distrust or ulterior motives can destroy one of these so-called friendships (2005). In direct contrast, though, Mooney talks about women sacrificing even the good of their organizations in order to maintain these interpersonal relationships. I guess because, as females, we are supposed to care that much about one another (2005). Should we value interpersonal relationships over our professional positions?

I don't know, Grandma. I keep going back to the fact that it may just be me. I'm sure you remember the female supervisor who told me how to dress, the appropriate length of my hair, the appropriate way to deal with interlopers into my job duties.... All of her commands and insinuations put me and my interests last! Why can't women truly support one another as

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer Field Notes; 10/28/2010; pp. 1-3

professionals? How come women never stop competing with one another, even when ages, experiences, and education levels can be so very different?!<sup>2</sup>

Your loving, frustrated,  
Granddaughter

Frustrated One,

My goodness you seem to be struggling right now! I'm certainly glad you felt compelled to share your concerns and doubts with me. I know it would be simple for me to build up your self-esteem and tell you that you are without a doubt brilliant. I could say anyone would be lucky to have you on their teaching staff. But as your grandmother, you would expect such a response from me. Instead of being predictable, why don't I share some of my experiences during my time as a higher education instructor with you? Hopefully some of this information will benefit you in your search for balance and truth.

I'm disappointed in your experience with your departmental dean. I wish you had experienced a mentor like Mrs. Long. She was very similar in authority, and sometimes attitude, to the two women you described to me in your letter, but Mrs. Long's motivations seemed to be pure and directed at my betterment....

Mrs. Long was the head of the secretarial business department where I taught. She was a very strong woman and I aspired to follow in her footsteps. Mrs. Long asked me to do many things for her, but not all of them were work-related. For example, I often returned to department stores clothes she bought and tried on at home. I didn't have a car at the time, so I rode the bus with the clothes in order to return them. "I would never have done that for myself!"<sup>3</sup> In return, Mrs. Long helped me buy clothes, and her taste gave me a professional persona I would never have developed on my own. I didn't have money, but she taught me how to be frugal with all of my purchases. "She had good taste."<sup>4</sup> This seems to be in direct contrast with your experience with your first female supervisor. I trusted that Mrs. Long had my best interest in mind when she commanded I alter my wardrobe.<sup>5</sup>

As you know, Mrs. Long hired me to teach in her program after I returned to Texas from California. All of the instructors in the secretarial business department were female. We were a group of women who worked together and socialized together out of necessity. At that time, women weren't allowed to socialize openly with men; we were required to maintain public morals and behaviors as assigned by the institution.<sup>6</sup>

Solomon does a nice job describing the post World War II era for women in higher education (1985). As described in the text, we were not allowed to continue employment at the university once we were married. "In fact, most of the schools would not award teaching jobs to married women. Some women married secretly and finished out their teaching contract for the year without telling the school of their change in status."<sup>7</sup> But the commands and expectations didn't stop there. Even being single had social limitations. I distinctly remember one time when my boyfriend and I went to a honky tonk in order to dance. Another man asked that I dance with him, and while we were taking a spin he asked if I was employed at the college. I admitted I was, but I was concerned after saying so because I thought I might end up in trouble.

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<sup>2</sup> Palmer Field Notes; 10/28/2010; pp. 1-3

<sup>3</sup> Sams Field Notes, 11/1/2010; p. 1, line 40, p. 2, line 1

<sup>4</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 2, line 4

<sup>5</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; pp. 1-2

<sup>6</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; pp. 2-4

<sup>7</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 5, lines 4-8

The women in our department even went out as a group to moderately priced restaurants on Saturday nights. We downplayed any relationships we had with boyfriends, and instead emphasized our interactions with one another.<sup>8</sup>

So you can see already, Dearest, that times were very different. Today, you are allowed a social life, and you can ascribe to your chosen value system without your employer imposing one for you. Also, you have the right to separate from the women with whom you work; you are not required to socialize with a predetermined group of women. Think about how difficult this was for the women in my time.<sup>9</sup> What if we didn't like one another? Think about this from Mrs. Long's perspective. She hated the social aspects of our positions. She even had me join all of the college's clubs to represent our department at all organizational gatherings because Mrs. Long didn't like to go where there were just women. "She felt time spent with women was mostly a waste of time." This smacks of Gibbscombe (2007) and Martin's (2000) statement that women sometimes find it necessary to adopt masculine personality traits in order to become successful. It didn't even occur to me to be offended that she would elect to send me instead.<sup>10</sup>

Let's take this prescribed relationship between the working women a step further. By virtue of her authority (Heifetz, 2007), Mrs. Long held the power within our department. And she didn't feel the need to share. Woe to the instructor who offended Mrs. Long! I remember one in particular: Ms. Janosky. Ms. Janosky joined the program as an assistant instructor, but Mrs. Long took an immediate dislike to her. Ms. Janosky was a top secretary for a well-known business man in a downtown Dallas office, and she had decided to attend our institution for a more extensive education. No matter what she did, Ms. Janosky couldn't please Mrs. Long. Even insignificant things were cause for a gripe where Mrs. Long and Ms. Janosky were concerned! For example, Ms. Janosky wore rubber bands around her wrist all the time. It drove Mrs. Long crazy! Additionally, Ms. Janosky opted out of any errands for Mrs. Long. This didn't serve to endear her to our program leader either. Eventually, Mrs. Long used her not-so-subtle authority to encourage Ms. Janosky to move into another area of development. Looking back, I don't see that there was anything wrong with Ms. Janosky's work ethic or product. I think she and Mrs. Long had differing viewpoints and life perspectives, and because we were forced to remain as a professional clique, their differences of opinion were blown way out of perspective.<sup>11</sup>

Relax, and enjoy the progress of your gender,  
Grandma

Grandma,

Your letter brought out shame in me. It seems the things you appreciated within your professional environment are what defeat me in mine. Like Mrs. Long, for example. I don't know that I would appreciate her on the same level you did. She sounds pretty bossy and demanding. Do you not find it a bit out of balance that you were willing to do things for her that you were unwilling to do for yourself? And her relationship with Ms. Janosky sounds almost catty.<sup>12</sup> I read in Tanenbaum's book the other day that female administrators can become defensive about their professional statuses, continually looking for recognition and confirmation from male and female coworkers alike (2002). Doesn't that sound a bit like the interactions between Mrs. Long and Ms. Janosky?

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<sup>8</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 4

<sup>9</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 6

<sup>10</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010 p. 3, line 23

<sup>11</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 2

<sup>12</sup> Palmer Field Notes; 11/2/2010; p. 1



Tanenbaum also stated that women do not traditionally want to work for other women. Both male and female subordinates view female supervisors as competitive, and believe they will withhold information from subordinates, and even sometimes take all the credit and resulting power from any professional effort, in order to advance (2002). Do you think that's how Ms. Janosky felt about Mrs. Long? Maybe women didn't have much confidence in female authorities during the 1950's. What do you think?

Not only do I view your perception of Mrs. Long differently, but I also see your struggle for independence from your coworkers as conflicting with my own feelings of professional isolation. I can't imagine the benefits of a social network of women in the work environment, and you were almost expected to maintain one! I know you stressed to me that you were put into this clique without choice, but there must have been some lasting benefit to spending all of your time with the same women.<sup>13</sup> Lepkowski (2009) reported the isolation I feel is an ongoing struggle for many women working to achieve professional status in higher education.

Still unclear, but always yours,  
Granddaughter

Granddaughter,

Child, you seem to have some pie-in-the-sky idea that women should maintain support of one another. Even in my day, during a time when women were practically forced to be friends, we did not band together as a unit. Overall, it seemed women were supportive of one another when trying to increase their pay, but were mainly polite to one another the rest of the time. We didn't really reach out much to groups of other women on campus. Isolation was still the order of the day for us.<sup>14</sup> Somehow you are under the assumption that because women worked in groups with one another that they valued one another's input. In order to emphasize my point that women did not trust or rely on one another, even in my day, let me remind you of a 1942 survey mentioned by Moss Kanter that stated clearly women preferred male bosses primarily because women were petty, critical, jealous, and controlling. Kanter always attributed these traits not only to the female bosses described in the survey, but also to people without personal or professional power (as cited by Mooney 2005). Obviously, even during my era women were not sold on one another as authority figures.

I think that for women outward competition has always been deemed inappropriate. Therefore, in response to societal expectations, women try to do battle without engaging directly with one another (Mooney, 2005). I think your expectation that women should bond together and support one another is unrealistic, and I disagree with it. Today, women are allowed to go their own directions, and they aren't bunched together under one collective identity like we were. Women should be allowed their freedom and independent choices, and should be allowed to like or dislike anything and everything.<sup>15</sup> Take Mrs. Long, for example. I remember one time a boy took me on a few dates during which he asked me questions about Mrs. Long. After several rounds of these twenty questions, I suggested he might want to ask Mrs. Long these questions in person. After awhile he finally took her on a date, and "I'll be damned if he didn't marry her."<sup>16</sup> Even she desired an identity apart from her role at our institution, and her role as a professional.

<sup>13</sup> Palmer Field Notes; 11/5/2010; pp. 11-12

<sup>14</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 4

<sup>15</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 6

<sup>16</sup> Sams Field Notes; 11/1/2010; p. 4, lines 5 & 6

You are brilliant, and you are capable. Rejoice in the fact that your professional pathway is not predetermined by a group of women or men with greater authority. Look at individuality as a good thing. My colleagues and I were given a group identity that cost us our freedom at times.

Remain loyal to yourself, as a woman.  
All my love,  
Grandma

## **Discussion and Implications**

Information I gleaned from the interview with my surrogate grandmother opened my eyes to a completely new perspective to the issues with which I struggle as an aspiring young professional in higher education, specifically concerns related to isolation, professional and personal support among women (or lack thereof), and the role of perception in the development of relationships.

### **Isolation**

I was struck at her perspective of my loneliness and isolation. She viewed the current isolation of women from one another as a sign of independence and development of equality, even though I saw it as a lack of organization and support for one another. Am I assigning inappropriate meaning to the social interactions of women today? It seems women today desire professional unity and a collective identity (Rossner & Lane, 2002). Could this possibly be counterproductive to the advancement earned by women in the early years of professionalism? Dr. Sally McMillan of Texas Tech University stated that generations of women must relearn lessons already experienced by previous generations (personal communication, October 26, 2010, referring to the work of Gerda Lerner, 1993). It occurs to me that the same could be true for my generation and its expectations of professional relationships between women in higher education. Unrealistic expectations can be a recipe for failure.

### **Support among Women**

Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns, and Marshall (2007) conveyed the limited number of women in professional positions in academia. While the numbers are stronger than when my grandmother was a professional in higher education, there are still fewer female professors than males (NCES, 2011). This limited number of females in senior positions makes it difficult for women coming through the ranks to establish supportive relationships. Even though some of these senior women may want to provide support to new academic professionals (Gerdes, 2010), the primary culture in higher education still pushes against those leadership traits that are traditionally viewed as feminine (LaFreniere & Longman, 2008; Northouse, 2010), like establishing supportive relationships. This bias not only affected the women of my grandmother's time (Cullen & Luna, 1993), it also limited their abilities (and consequently the abilities of later generations) to provide nurturing and supportive relationships to the newer faculty members (Cullen & Luna, 1993).

While I clearly felt a lack of support in my professional setting, it bears mentioning that my grandmother's responses to questions related to support were almost conflicting. She viewed aspects of her relationship with Ms. Long as instructive when very similar circumstances felt judgmental to me. In addition, Ms. Long's competitive nature and lack of

patience with female colleagues did not register as offensive behavior to my grandmother. So it must be noted that the definition of support varies for each generation.

## Perception

Generating additional research outlining the historical interpersonal relationships of professional women in higher education is necessary in order to properly perceive the current relationships as they exist today. As already mentioned, this study brought to light that different generations (and I am certain different individuals within generations) have differing perspectives when defining support and lack of trust. What appears to be support and guidance in one scenario may be viewed as judgmental, controlling behavior in a second scenario. What was once considered “preparing” a faculty member for professional responsibilities could now be seen as an abusive mentoring relationship (Phillip-Jones, 1982). In order to successfully interpret data gathered on these current relationships, and their implications on future growth of women, institutions, and professionals in higher education, it is imperative that we understand those things that truly represent growth for women as a group, historical successes for these women, and patterns of development as a whole (Perlmutter, 2010). Perspectives frame all experiences. We cannot fully appreciate the experiences of women, either historical or present-day, without fully understanding the perspectives of the women involved in the identified events and the eras in which these women’s events occurred.

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